

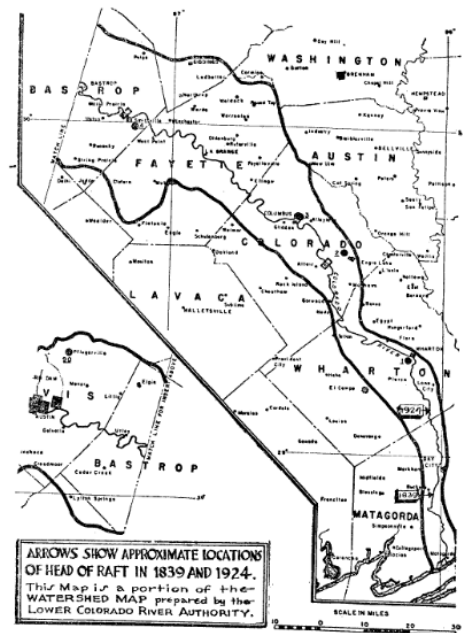
History of Transportation on the Water - of People and Goods - in Austin, TX

Austin does not necessarily have a long history of using its waterways as a form of transportation. In fact - there are no canals, no regularly used ferries, no public transportation on the lakes that had to be used out of necessity, and there are no freight boats or ports like there is on the Mississippi River. There are many reasons for this, many of the trials and errors experienced by the city that proved Austin could not rely on water transportation the way that it had originally wanted to. Austin has tried to be a hub for trade, it has attempted to be a place reachable by boat, and because of these attempts, there is a history of Austin waterways being used for transportation briefly albeit sporadically in various iterations made by different generations.

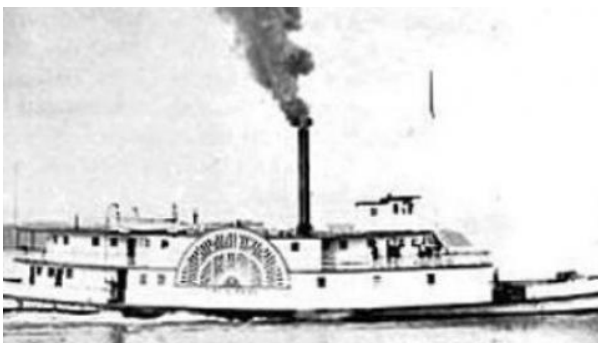
The journey of attempted water transportation in Austin begins in the early 1800s and takes us through attempts to navigate, establishing trade routes, fighting the shallowness and sluggish speed of the Colorado River, building steamboats, losing to railroads, creating cruise experiences and communing on the water, boats being destroyed, and brings us to the late 1900s where transportation on Austin water is strictly recreational as we know it today.

The beginning of documented water transportation in Austin begins with Moses and Stephen F. Austin. In 1802, Moses Austin began creating trade routes in Texas along the Colorado River, most likely from the Gulf of Mexico up to what is now Austin, or to settlements nearby along the river. We know this from the invoices and the Austin Papers

from the years 1802 to 1810. In 1821, Moses Austin died and Stephen F. Austin began the initiative to be the first to navigate a river in Texas, aiming to take a steamboat named the Lively on the Colorado River, to navigate from Matagorda to Austin. (Connor, 1995) This never became a reality, most likely due to the six mile log raft blocking the passage on the Colorado River about six miles from Matagorda. The Lower Colorado River provides a watershed map that shows this raft that blocks the passage to Austin (figure 1). (Clay, 1994) People settling in Austin and along the Colorado River had goals for the river to be used as a main passage for trade and transportation, and eventually this materialized into reality for a short period of time.



North of the raft blocking the bottom portion of the river, there were keelboats, specifically the one called David Crockett. These were primarily used in the 1830s and 40s for transportation of people and goods to other settlements along the river near Austin. Eventually the Kateward Steamboat was constructed specifically for trade, the six mile raft near Matagorda was cut through, and



the Kateward made it to Austin in the spring of 1845. It was built to hold 600 bales of cotton in the shallow 3 foot water of the river. (figure 2) (*The Kate Ward: The Colorado's First Side-Wheeler Steamer*, 2022) This was the first steamboat to make it to Austin, as the trip from

Galveston to Austin was one that many ship captains did not want to make because of the



very slow nature of the river, and that is one of the many reasons that larger canoes and flatboats had not made the journey before the Kateward. (LEONARD KUBIAK's TEXAS HISTORY WEBPAGES, n.d.) During this same time, there were small ferries used to take automotives, goods, horses, and people across the water to the other side of the river. Figure 3

shows an example of this, a photo of people and horses going to the small ferry on the Colorado River in Travis County. (*Ferry Boat on Colorado River - The Portal to Texas History*, n.d.) This was possibly the peak of transportation on the Colorado River for the purpose of trade and long distance travel, because very soon after, the railroads made it to Austin and eliminated the need for these steamboats to make that long and sluggish journey from Galveston to Austin.

The use of steamboats on the Colorado River was not utilized after the year of 1871. (*Austin's First Railroad Altered the City Forever*, 2019) Railroads reached Austin and cut right through town, making it the most convenient way to import and export goods.

Because the river in Austin was no longer being relied upon for trade, this began the increase in using the water for recreational purposes rather than for trade and navigation. Figure 4 shows the leisurely nature that was likely common on the river during the decline



of larger steamboats on the water. Quickly after the railroads came, a dam was built, creating a lake in Austin that could be used for many different purposes. From then on, the river was likely used for leisure trips rather than as a necessity for transportation.

The Austin Dam was built in 1892, creating Lake McDonald and the Lake Navigation Company. Transportation on this lake was mainly for leisure, McDonald and other Lake Navigation Company investors imagined that the water would be full of

tourists and that building a boat for cruises on the lake would be very profitable. (*Austin Once Had The Best Dam Steamboat In Texas.*, n.d.)

Thus, they created the Ben Hur, a large cruise boat on Lake McDonald that made a 60 mile trip



every day to entertain the people that flocked to Austin for vacation or for locals looking for entertainment. (figure 5) (*Austin Once Had The Best Dam Steamboat In Texas.*, n.d.) This water transportation

experience included dinner, dancing, music, and shows. It also offered a cruise in the moonlight on the lake as well. There were many other dam boats on the river and selling water transportation as a luxury seemed to be making the Lake Navigation Company quite a profit. Figure 6 shows a newspaper clipping titled “Dam Boats” from 1892 that describes the Lake Navigation Company and their excitement to utilize the lake for many things including

DAM BOATS.

PROSPECTUS OF THE LAKE NAVIGATION COMPANY FOR AUSTIN.

What Our Lake Really Means and How It Can Be Gloriously Utilized—It Can Be Best Done Alone in this Way.

The Lake Navigation company was incorporated under the laws of the State of Texas on July 15, 1891, for the purpose of “buying, constructing, leasing, owning, operating and conveying all kinds of steamships, vessels and any kind of water craft.”

The immediate, and probably the sole purpose of the company is to own and operate steamboats on the lake above the great dam at Austin, Texas.

The company has been organized and a franchise has been obtained from the city of Austin.

Two small steamboats have been purchased and one of them is now being used as a pleasure boat on the small lake already created by the partially built dam.

In addition to the two small boats already procured a moderate sized side-wheel steamer is now being built near the site of the dam. This steamer will be finished and ready for her trial trip on or about August 1, 1892, and will have a carrying capacity of twelve hundred people.



On April 6, 1900, nearly 17-inches of rain in a 48 hour period caused the McDonald Dam to break resulting in eighteen deaths, the destruction of 100 homes, damage to the dam powerhouse and waterworks plant, and the destruction of the excursion steamer BEN HUR.

entertainment and tourism. This came to a halt when the Austin Dam unfortunately broke and caused mass destruction on April 6th, 1900. (figure 7) Lives were lost and boats were destroyed, and this resulted in a decline of leisure water transportation.

When dams failed in Austin, ferries made brief returns to get

people and mechanisms from one side of the river to the other. This was most common in the years 1941-1970, and was specifically documented in Lake Travis. (Dadamo, 2019)

There were also several recreational boat companies popping up, specifically Fowler's Boats. Fowler's Boats is a family owned company that made and sold boats for other families to use on the lakes. Since the lakes were created by the dams built around Austin, the lakes have been primarily used for recreational purposes such as canoeing and kayaking, college rowing teams, bat watching tours, and boat parties for the people of Austin that love to be on the water.

The rise and fall of transportation on the Austin waterways through its history demonstrates humans' connection to water and their ability to use water for transportation despite not having the most ideal of circumstances. The water transportation history included applications of impressive technology and willpower to make something seemingly impossible happen. Six miles of raft were cut through, steamboats were engineered to carry enormous amounts of weight in very shallow water, and ferries both big and small were constructed to make living in Austin more

convenient. Although it is nothing like cities along the Mississippi River, or even other Texas cities like San Antonio, Houston, and Dallas, there is still a small history documented in the local newspapers and photographs that tells a story about transportation on the Austin waterways and how it came to be.

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